

(Washington, DC)— Today Wisconsin Senators Russ Feingold and Herb Kohl, Congressman Dave Obey and Congresswoman Gwen Moore sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) asking the VA to open an additional Vet Center in north central Wisconsin and to either add additional counselors or open a new center in Milwaukee.

Veterans in both areas face access challenges; tens of thousands of veterans in north central Wisconsin cannot obtain counseling at a community counseling office, or Vet Center, because there is no facility nearby. And veterans in the Milwaukee area have a difficult time obtaining services due to the large number of veterans in the area.

“While we have recently made progress in establishing a new Vet Center in Brown County and another, opening soon, in La Crosse, there are still tens of thousands of Wisconsin veterans who do not have access to the critical services and support these Vet Centers provide,” Feingold said. **“As service members return from Iraq and Afghanistan, post-traumatic stress disorder remains at an alarming rate, and we must ensure every veteran has access to excellent care no matter where in Wisconsin they live. The VA should take into consideration the disproportionately low number of Vet Centers we have compared to other states and quickly approve more centers in Wisconsin.”**

“For veterans who live in Wisconsin’s north central region, seeing a specialist can mean hours in the car and expensive trips across the state. That’s a fundamental disservice to the men and women who have sacrificed for this country. There is a demonstrated need for a new Vet Center in northern Wisconsin and additional counselors at the Milwaukee Vet Center to allow them access to the health services they earned,” Kohl said.

Congressman Obey said, **“There are tens of thousands of vets in North Central Wisconsin who can’t regularly see a counselor at a Vet Center because there isn’t a center anywhere near them. These veterans stepped up to serve their country. Each and every one of them should be able to access the services we owe them, no questions asked.”**

Congresswoman Moore said, **“There just aren’t enough counselors and Vet Centers to help every Wisconsin veteran who needs it. If the VA added counselors and more Vet Centers in Wisconsin, we’d go a long way to ensuring our vets get the help they deserve.”**

Vet Centers provide counseling to veterans in non-clinical settings that can be more welcoming to veterans and complement the services provided by the VA medical centers and outpatient clinics. They are critical to helping service members deal with issues like post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health and readjustment issues. Wisconsin has a disproportionately low number of Vet Centers compared to other states like West Virginia or Hawaii that have a smaller veteran population than Wisconsin, but have nine and seven Vet Centers respectively compared to Wisconsin’s four.

The text of their letter follows:

April 28, 2010

Dr. Alfonso Batres

Chief Readjustment Counseling Officer,

Veterans Health Administration

U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

Dear Dr. Batres,

We write to thank you for your efforts to expand the number of Vet Centers in Wisconsin. The decision to open two new centers in Wisconsin has extended coverage to significantly more veterans. We now urge you to examine the need for an additional center in the north central region and additional counselors or a new center in Milwaukee to ensure that there is adequate coverage throughout the state.

As demonstrated in the attached map, a significant number of veterans in north central Wisconsin cannot obtain regular counseling through a Vet Center due to the distance to the nearest center. While we have excellent clinics in Wisconsin that provide exemplary care for physical conditions, we continue to hear concerns among veterans that the clinics focus on providing medication for mental health concerns and do not always have adequate staff to provide counseling. Similarly, mobile units cannot provide veterans consistent, regular counseling. As the Vet Centers specialize in providing counseling, we would appreciate it if you would take into consideration the need for a Vet Center in this underserved region.

While we are grateful to the VA for deciding to create new Vet Centers in Wisconsin, the state still has a disproportionately low number of Vet Centers compared to other states. For example, West Virginia and Hawaii both have a much smaller veteran population than Wisconsin's and a significantly smaller land area; however these states will have nine and seven Vet Centers respectively by the end of the year, compared to Wisconsin's four. We urge you to address this inequity when you consider the placement of new centers.

We have also heard from veterans that they would like to see additional counseling offered in and around Milwaukee. Based on feedback we have received from veterans in the area, there appears to be a need for additional counselors at the Milwaukee Vet Center or another Vet Center in Milwaukee. We urge you to consider both of options.

We also understand that Vet Centers send counselors to surrounding areas to provide counseling on a rotational basis. We strongly support this approach.

We would appreciate it if you could provide information on the number of veterans who have received mental health care at Wisconsin Vet Centers, the number of counselors available, funding levels for Wisconsin Vet Centers and the VA policy on the appropriate caseload per counselor. If you do not find that a full center is justified in either of these areas, we would ask

that you consider an outstation and explain why a full center is not needed.

As you know, we are strong supporters of your work in the Readjustment Counseling Program and the excellent care provided by the Vet Centers. These centers are becoming increasingly important as more service members return from Iraq and Afghanistan with alarming rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. We appreciate your prompt response to this inquiry. Please contact us if we can be of assistance in supporting the Readjustment Counseling Program.

Sincerely,

Senator Russ Feingold

Senator Herb Kohl

Congressman David Obey

Congresswoman Gwen Moore

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For an interview with Congresswoman Gwen Moore, please contact David Frey at 202-225-4572.